



## A Classic Maya Carved Capstone from Buenavista del Cayo, Belize

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However, they are much damaged and a large part of the bone pieces are missing. They are apparently very old, as also the wood indicates, and it is known that these rare pieces have been purchased in Rome, where they probably are brought by a missionary from Mexico, which both their appearance as well as similar pieces in other museums points to.”

- (6) The Thomsen referred to by Tylor is Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865), a prolific figure in the history of Danish archaeology and museology who served as the director of the National Museum from 1816 to 1865 (see Jensen 1992:261–310). His statement about the purchase “in Rome” seems odd, but could be a shorthand expression alluding to the ultimate origin of objects actually bought in London.
- (7) “*Multa lignea et testacea idolorum simulacra, forma et figura singulari, ac genti mexicana propria*” (San Bartolomeo 1805: 44). G. Colini (1885:324–325) identified three wooden objects (two masks and an anthropomorphic idol) then in the Museo Borgiano as proceeding from that lot, but his identification was later challenged by H. Bischof, who ascertained that the three objects were of Colombian provenance (Bischof 1974).
- (8) Even if those gifted by Domingo de Betanzos were among the richer lots of Mesoamerican objects brought to Italy during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, other lots are also recorded in historical sources. For example, Bernal Díaz del Castillo mentions the visit that Hernán Cortés’ ambassador Juan de Herrada (or Juan de Rada) paid in April 1529 to Clement VII, bringing a “rich present of precious stones and golden jewels” (Díaz del Castillo 1991:795–797); another interesting case is the one of a (probably Dominican) missionary who, around the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, brought to Italy a rich lot of Mixtec objects (Domenici 2016a; 2017a).
- (9) “to særdeles sjældne Masker af Træ, indlagte med slebne Tyrkiser, Perlemoder og Conchylier” (Steinhauer 1875: 24). In the previous edition of the same guide, from 1873, Steinhauer does not mention the two mosaic objects, and we therefore assume that they were only put on display sometime between 1873 and 1875.
- (10) “To mærkelige Masker af Træ med paalagt Mosaik and haarde, slebne Stene og Muslingeskal” (Anonymous 1909: 131).
- (11) We hope to be able to perform scientific analyses of the Copenhagen artifacts in the future and report their results in another publication.
- (12) Here it is worth briefly commenting on the possible meanings of the word *xolotl*, which is commonly translated as ‘page, male servant’ (Molina 2008 [1571]:160–161; see also Karttunen 1992:330), but is also frequently understood as ‘dog, monster, twin’. The “monstrous” aspect of *Xolotl* seems to be related with his anthropomorphic representations, where the god sometimes shows deformities in the hands and feet. Related terms, possibly due to their perceived “monstrous” character, are *huexolotl* ‘turkey’ (literally ‘big *xolotl*’) and perhaps also *axolotl* (‘water *xolotl*’), the famous edible salamander of highland Mexico (*Ambystoma mexicanum*). The etymology of the term *xolotl* is unclear (see, however Dakin 2004), but as Magnus Pharaoh Hansen has pointed out, *xolotl* appears to be a reference to someone or something you feed and take care of and who in turns provides some service or produce, like servants or domesticated animals, as for example dogs. In present-day Nahuatl dialects *xolo* can also mean ‘baby, small child’ (Magnus Pharaoh Hansen, personal communication, 2018).
- (13) To make things more complex, the mask with protruding tongue now at the Pigorini Museum has often been interpreted as a representation of Ehecatl; without entering here into the details of an interpretive debate that would require much more space than allowed, the senior author thinks that its interpretation as Ehecatl is highly debatable and that the most convincing hypothesis remains that of Eric Thompson, who interpreted the Roman mask as a representation of the Merchant God Ek Chuaj/Yacatecuhtli (Thompson 1966:169); as previously mentioned, in the same article Thompson also interpreted the Copenhagen specimen as a representation of the Merchant God, an hypothesis that obviously we do not concur with.
- (14) According to Alfonso Caso (1967:194), ‘3 Itzcuintli’ is associated with Iztapaltotec (based on *Codex Telleriano Remensis* fol.23v) and maybe with Xiuhtecuhtli (based on Eduard Seler’s statement related with a couple of Sahagún’s passages; see Seler 1902–1903:157); Caso put a question mark beside this identification, probably because Sahagún’s passages referred by Seler actually deal with the day ‘1 Itzcuintli’, not ‘3 Itzcuintli’. None of the two associations, however, seem to have any meaningful relationship with the Copenhagen specimen.
- (15) Coltman’s proposal was later criticized by Ivan Šprajc (2008), generating a debate (Coltman 2009; Šprajc 2012) that, even if related with the Statuette’s identification, was actually focused on more general interpretations of the various manifestations of the Venus complex. Rosado Pascual (2018:33) accepts the original interpretation of the statuette as *Xolotl*.
- (16) It should be reminded here that E. Thompson suggested that the discussed Copenhagen and Rome mosaic masks could proceed from the Chontal area of Potonchan (Thompson 1966:169). Thompson’s proposal was based on both a possible origin of codices Laud and Fejérváry-Mayer from the Veracruz-Tabasco region and on the commonly held assumption that most of the objects sent to Europe in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century should have been part of the shipments sent by Spanish conquistadors such as Juan de Grijalva or Hernán Cortés; today we know that, at least for the objects sent to Italy, it was not the case, missionaries being their most probable carriers.

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## A Classic Maya Carved Capstone from Buenavista del Cayo, Belize

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One of the defining features of Classic Maya architecture are their well-known corbel vaults (Kubler 1961; Pollock 1965; Smith 1940). Thick walls supported these weighty vaults, each course gradually stepping inwards towards the center of the room, the uppermost course crowned by a series of stone slabs, known as capstones (Loten and Pendergast 1984: 25, Fig. 13). The central, or axial, capstone of a room was at times decorated, with either a scene or a dedicatory text, sometimes with just a large red painted dot. Whereas the majority of such decorated capstones were painted, sculpted capstones do exist, although they are extremely rare elements in the lexicon of Classic Maya architecture. Painted capstones, in contrast, are not uncommon, but even they are far more typical of

northern sites, especially in Campeche and Yucatan, than of those located in the Central or Southern Lowlands. Both painted and carved capstones have the same function and undoubtedly share much of their ideotechnic cultural intent (Staines Cicero 2001, 2008).

Decorated capstones have been recorded at a number of Puuc Architectural Tradition sites in northeastern Campeche and western Yucatan, among these, Itzimte, Nakeb, Xkochkax, Kiuik, and Oxkintok (Mayer 1998; Merk 2016; see also Mathews 1993). Painted capstones are also known from vaulted structures at Chichen Itza and Ek Balam, as well as tomb vaults at both Tikal and Caracol that date from the Late or Terminal Classic (ca. AD 700–950), as is a somewhat

unusual carved capstone from a tomb in the Conchita *sacbe*-terminus group, located about 3 km southeast of the Caracol epicenter (Nikolai Grube pers. comm. 2004). The sculpted capstone (provisionally designated “Monument 14”) excavated at the western Belize Valley site of Buenavista del Cayo in 1988 appears, however, to be earlier in date than the aforementioned examples, on present evidence, both stratigraphic and paleographic, appertaining to the seventh century. This makes the Buenavista capstone one of the earliest such decorated elements, and also greatly expands the known range of this architectural feature in the Central Lowlands.

The site of Buenavista del Cayo (hereafter Buenavista) is a medium-size center situated on the uppermost terrace of the Mopan River within the rolling uplands triangle loosely defined by the confluence of the Mopan and Macal Rivers (Ball and Taschek 1991) (Fig. 1). Buenavista physically consists of three large, conjoined plaza-complexes covering about 18 hectares, and includes among its monuments at least thirteen uncarved stelae and altars; two ballcourts; an acropolis-palace; two major elite residential plaza groups; and more than ten additional courtyard groups. Two of its pyramidal structures still stand to heights of 17 and 21 meters (Ball and Taschek 2004). Its sociopolitically symbolic south ballcourt dates to the first century BC.

In the middle fifth century AD, the ceremonial heart of Buenavista was the Central Plaza, a spacious formal space defined by a quartet of frontally staired platforms framing its east, west, north, and south sides (Fig. 2). Constructed over the late fourth to early fifth centuries, all of the major plaza structures as well as several ancillary units were built as part of this large-scale enterprise, and the signature Classic stela-altar complex also was introduced.

Structure 4 is a single component platform surmounted by a dual-chamber vaulted building (Str. 4-1<sup>st</sup>) with middle/late seventh century modifications (Fig. 3). A wide outset-inset stairway ascends the front of the platform. The building

crowning the platform was entered via a single, 3 m-wide doorway on the front side. Inside, another doorway through the spinewall just west of center connected front and rear chambers.

Very little remains of the once crowning building, its condition belying the likelihood of gradual, natural post-abandonment deterioration and collapse, but rather strongly suggesting the probability of deliberate demolition. While no direct evidence as to when this might have taken place was recovered, indications of a major destruction event from elsewhere on site can be dated tightly to the very late seventh century (Ball and Taschek 2017), and it is reasonable to see this as being the same event that saw the demolition of Structure 4 as well.

When unearthed in 1988, the capstone (Fig. 4) was found askew atop the spinewall stub of Structure 4-1<sup>st</sup> (Fig. 5). It measures roughly 43–45 cm in (undamaged) width; 43–53 cm in fractured, incomplete length; and 16–17 cm in thickness, dimensions consistent with those of 158 decorated capstones recorded by Leticia Staines Cicero (2001: 393) in her exhaustive study of such architectural elements (average unbroken width, 45 cm; mean unbroken length, 74 cm – the extrapolated unbroken length of the Buenavista capstone would have been around 66 cm).

### The Glyphic Text

The text of the Buenavista capstone is moderately eroded and consists of three glyph blocks arranged in a single, c. 10 cm high band (Fig. 6). The first (A1) and last (C1) lateral glyphs have both suffered some spalling and erosion. Far from being a simple decorative design, it is most clearly the central glyph (B1) – designated as T769a in the Thompson catalog – that stands out (Thompson 1962: 369–370). Based on phonetic complementation and patterns of substitution we now know that this glyph is read *way*, a reading proposed some decades ago now (see Stuart and Houston 1994:71–72, 77).

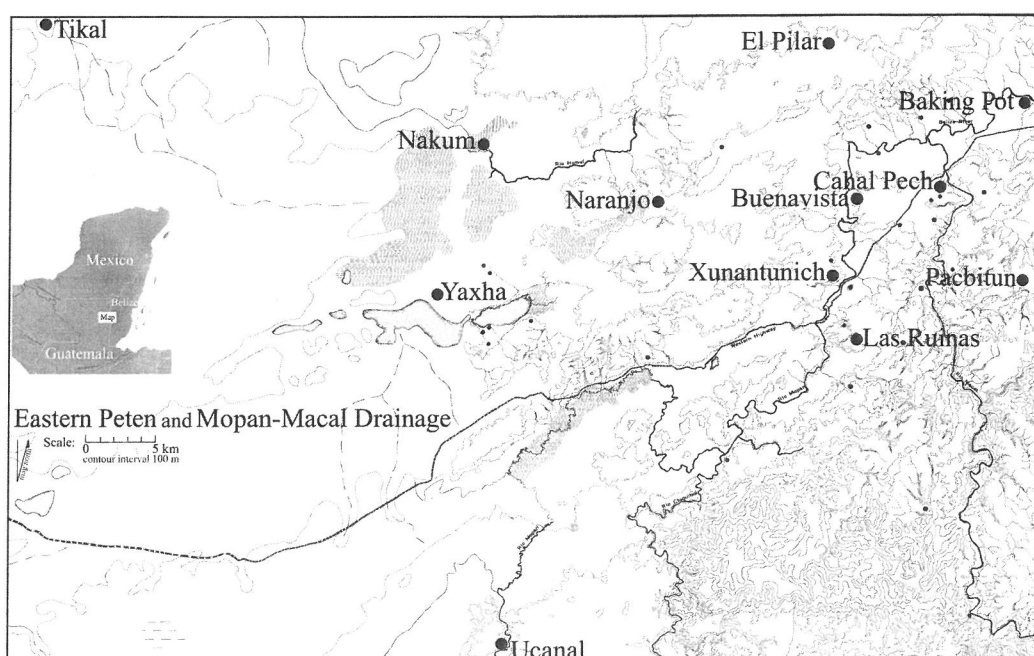


Fig. 1. Map of the eastern Central Lowlands showing the location of Buenavista del Cayo and other salient sites in the vicinity (map by Jennifer Taschek).



Table 1: Transliteration and structural analysis of the dedicatory texts on capstones at the site of Ek Balam, Yucatan, Mexico.

Site	Context	Dedicatory Verb	Chamber	Architectural feature
Ek Balam	Str. 8, Capstone 1	ma-ka-ja	u-WAY	#-OTOT-ti
Ek Balam	Str. 9, Capstone 2	ma-#-ja	u-WAY	yo-OTOT?
Ek Balam	Str. 1, Room 6, Capstone 3	ma-ka-ja	—	u-{k'a}-li
Ek Balam	Str. 1, Room 36, Capstone 6	ma-ka-ja	WAY-ya-li?	u-k'a-le
Ek Balam	Str. 1, Room 33, Capstone 7	ma-ka-ja	u-WAY?-li	yo-OTOT-ti
Ek Balam	Str. 1, Room 38, Capstone 10	ma-ka-ja	u-WAY-li	u-k'a-#
Ek Balam	Str. 1, Room 45, Capstone 14	ma-ka	u-WAY-li	u-k'a-li
Ek Balam	Str. 1, Room 62, Capstone 18	ma-ka	WAY-li	u-{k'a}-li
Ek Balam	Str. 1, Room 35, Capstone 19	ma-ka-#	u-#-li	u-SAK xo-ko-NAH

Table 2: A selection of well-dated texts including the T3 allograph. Monuments are listed in chronological sequence according to latest date recorded.

Site	Monument	Coordinate	Date (AD)	Long Count
Yaxchilan	Lintel 35	A1, D7	537	(9.5.2.10.6?)
Yaxchilan	Lintel 49	C4	537	(9.5.2.10.6?)
Caracol	Stela 6	Basal register	603	(9.8.10.0.0)
Altar de Sacrificios	Stela 18	B12	618	(9.9.5.0.0)
Altar de Sacrificios	Stela 12	C1	628	(9.9.15.0.0)
Altar de Sacrificios	Stela 9	E6	633	(9.10.0.0.0)
Caracol	Stela 3	C5a, C9a	637	(9.10.4.15.8)
La Rejolla	Stela 1	E12	640	(9.10.7.5.1)
Caracol	Hieroglyphic Stair 1	B1b, E1b, G2a, L1a, O1a	642	(9.10.10.0.0)
Tikal	Stela 22	A2	771	(9.17.0.0.0)
Tikal	Stela 19	B7	790	(9.18.0.0.0)

Graphically this logogram represents the curved pinchers or mandibular claws of *Scolopendromorpha*, or tropical centipedes (Taube 2003: 406–418; see also Kettunen and Davis 2004). This logogram is that used in combination with that for *haab* ‘year’ to write the name of the final five days of the solar calendar, known as *Wayhaab* in the Classic period and *Wayeb* in Colonial Yukatek. Iconographically, these maws are used to demarcate Underworld spaces, or architectural emulations thereof, and may even serve to designate cavernous features such as cenote (Taube 2003: 413–416). Initially, this sign was thought to represent some sort of “portal” to the Underworld, an interpretation favored by Linda Schele and her colleagues (see Freidel et al. 1993).

That this sign occurs often in glyphic texts on capstones was noted, among others, by Michael Carrasco and Kerry Hull (2002; Carrasco 2015: 387–394). Many if not most painted capstones found in the Northern Lowlands of the Maya area also bear depictions of deities and supernatural agents, preferentially *K'awiil*, the personification of lightning and royal power, and the mature Maize God (Taube 1992: 44–50, 69–79; see also Staines Cicero 2001). Undoubtedly, these deities served to offer divine protection over a given structure and may have been conceived of as patronal deities of particular structures and perhaps even specific rooms, or architectural spaces. Often times these capstones bear small augural captions, also known from the codices of the later centuries, such as the Madrid and Dresden Codex (García-Campillo 1998). As such, some of the capstones can almost

be described as pages from a codical almanac by virtue of their lithographic quality, format and the combination of deity with short presage. Such captions include *ox wi'il* ‘abundant food’ and the difrasismo, or metonymic kenning, *yax k'an* ‘riches, abundance’ (Carrasco and Hull 2002: 27). Building on the cosmological significance of the *way* sign in its iconographic context, Carrasco and Hull (2002: 27) have suggested that the *way* glyph “names the portal as the space between the walls of the corbelled vault”. In this understanding of *way* as a reference to type of “portal” to the supernatural realm, architectural vault masses would emulate cosmogonic space and provide a setting for the mythological events tied to the deities depicted on capstones (Carrasco and Hull 2002; Carrasco 2015). As we will see, there may be a more prosaic explanation for the use of this glyph on capstones, which we explore below.

The original placement of the Buenavista capstone, at the primary axis of the vault, might well have marked the formal completion and inauguration of Structure 4-1<sup>st</sup> and possibly of the late Gadsden era plaza complex as a whole. This is supported in large measure by the glyphic captions that accompany painted capstones found at other sites in the Lowlands. The most substantial site-specific corpora of such painted capstones are those of Chichen Itza (31), Ek Balam (20) and Santa Rosa Xtampak (16), all in the Northern Lowlands (Staines Cicero 2001: 391). Together these represent a little under half of the known examples of painted capstones in the Maya Lowlands. In reviewing the glyphic texts of these

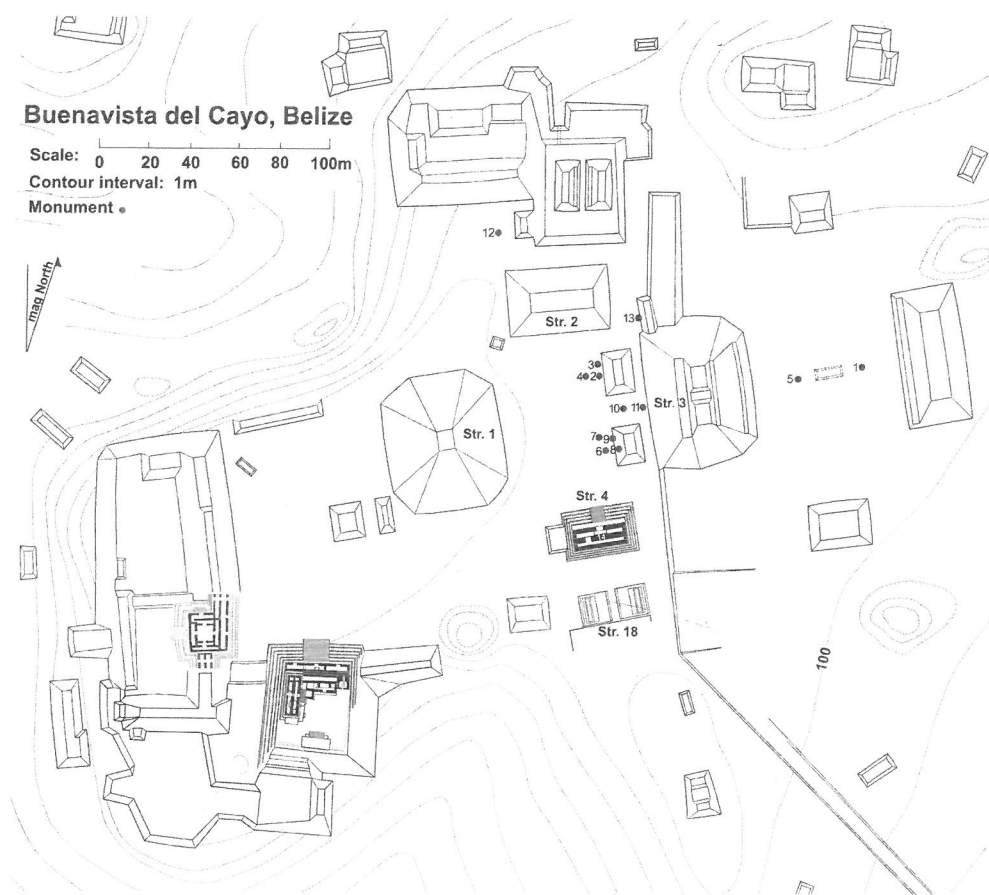


Fig. 2. Site map of Buenavista del Cayo identifying major structures and monuments. Note the location of Structure 4 and the carved capstone, marked off as "14" (map by Jennifer Taschek).

capstones we can see that there is an evident focus on dedicatory rituals, especially self-referential ones pertaining to the dedication of the structure that contains the particular capstone. The painted capstones from Ek Balam are particularly revealing this regard and are quite pertinent to the present case (Table 1).

From these examples we can see that the structure of these dedicatory records is fairly standard, with most initiated by a Calendar Round, providing a record of the date of a given building's dedication (Fig. 7). The dedicatory verb is rather immutably the passive inflection of the verb *mak*, literally 'to close', but here used in the sense of 'to cover, seal', both in reference to the placement of a capstone at the apex of the vault, but also in much the same way as comparable "topping out" ceremonies on modern construction sites. Typically, this verb is written with three syllabograms as **ma-ka-ja** wherein the post-vocalic [h] is reconstructed to mark the passive as *mahkaj*. At times, however, it is underspelled or rendered in a truncated manner as **ma-ka**, perhaps as a more phonetic and/or dialectal spelling. The patient of the verb and the subject of the dedicatory ritual is *way*, here connected to Yucatekan lexical entries such as *celda* 'cell', *aposeno* 'chamber', and *retramiento donde uno duerme* 'retreat where one sleeps' (Barrera Vásquez 1980: 915). The logogram **WAY** is represented both with and without its phonetic complement **-ya**, and the lexeme *way* occurs either as a simple noun or as a part of a possessed construction, with *u-* marking the third person singular possessive prefix. At times the whole is also

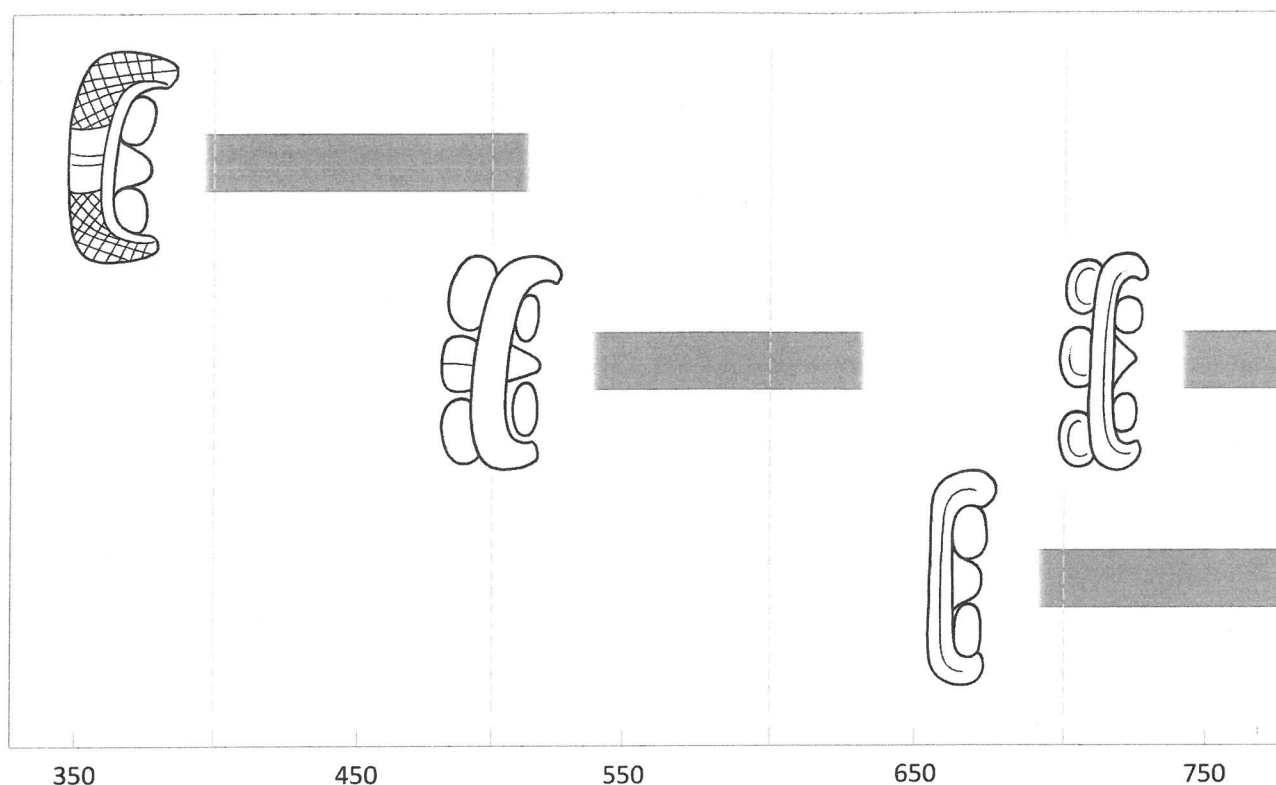
followed by the syllabogram **-li** prompting the partitive suffix **-il**.

These spellings are significant in how these compare to the spellings seen on the Buenavista capstone. On this architectural element the dedicatory verb (A1) is written **#-ka-la?** wherein the initial sign is at present unknown on account of spalling and erosion. Considering the prevalence of the use of the verb *mak* 'to close', we suspect that the verb was initially written **ma-ka** and followed surprisingly enough by what may be a **-la** and not **-ja** as would otherwise be expected. Together this may be read *mak-al*, yielding a nominalization that can be translated as 'it is the closing', or a participial form, to be understood as 'it is closed'. The subject of the clause is found in the following glyph block (B1), here written **u-WAY**. This duplicates many of the spellings seen at Ek Balam, but here this glyph block is closed by what may be a head-variant glyph, representing a stylized centipede. Whereas we might expect the syllabograms **ya** or **li** in this context, this particular centipede head typically functions as **wa**. The presence of this last sign remains difficult to explain but may serve as a type of phonetic complement or to spell a suffix.

Some scholars have proposed that *way* should be understood more broadly as 'room' based on the glosses available in Maya languages (e.g. Lacadena García-Gallo 2003: 119). Due its prevalence at Ek Balam and its paucity in the Central Lowlands it was also thought that this term may be a marker of Classic Yucatekan (ibid.). However, with the discovery of the Buenavista capstone it is now clear that the use of this



Table 3: Approximate temporal distribution of three allographs of the vocalic sign *u* (diagram by Christophe Helmke).



term has greater geographical breath, and its perceived paucity may rather be due to the relative absence of capstones bearing dedicatory captions in the Central Lowlands.

In addition, considering the intimate pairing of capstones with the verb *mak* suggests to us that *way* in the Classic period probably served specifically as a lexeme for ‘vault’.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is also supported by the references made to particular architectural forms or features following *way*, in

the capstone texts at Ek Balam. There we see terms such as *y-otoot* ‘his house, home’, *u-k’aal* ‘its room’, or ‘it is the room of’, or particular names of structures (see Table 1). Based on these examples we can conclude that the dedicatory texts record the closing of vaults, within a specific structure, forming part of a particular room, within a named edifice. For instance, the elaborately decorated temple within the Acropolis – wherein Ek Balam’s great eighth century king, *Ukit Kan*

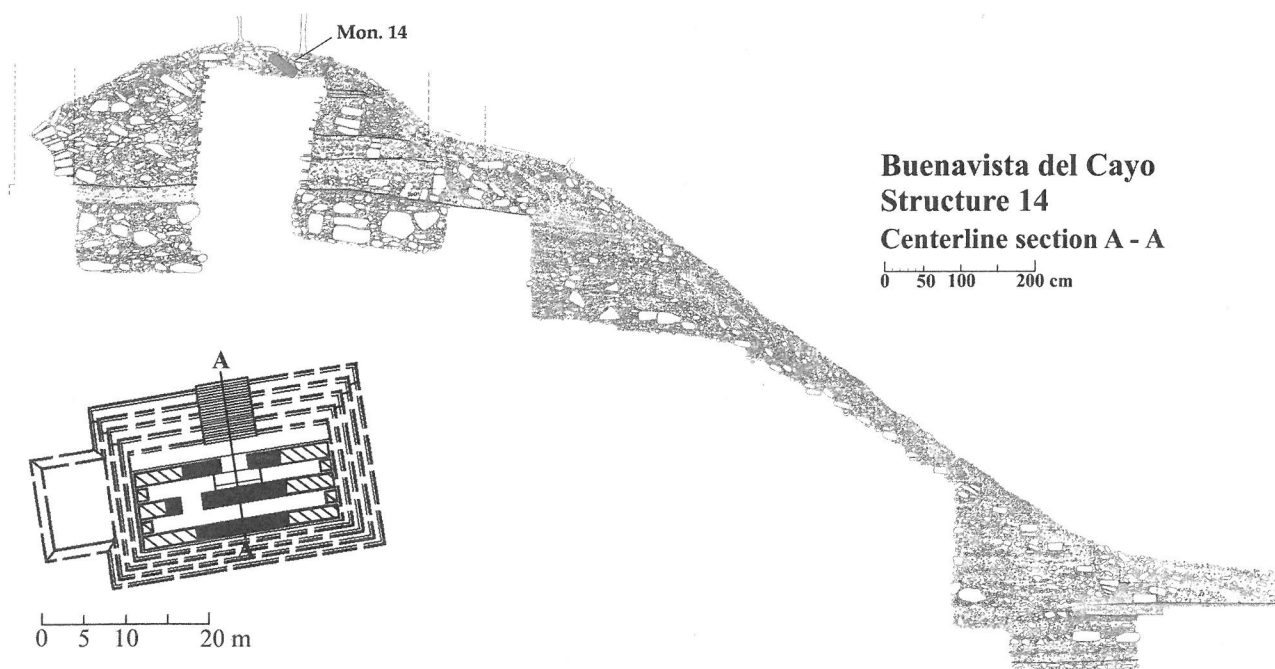


Fig. 3. Plan and section of Structure 4. Note the context of the carved capstone, marked as “Mon. 14” atop the spinewall (drawings by Jennifer Taschek).

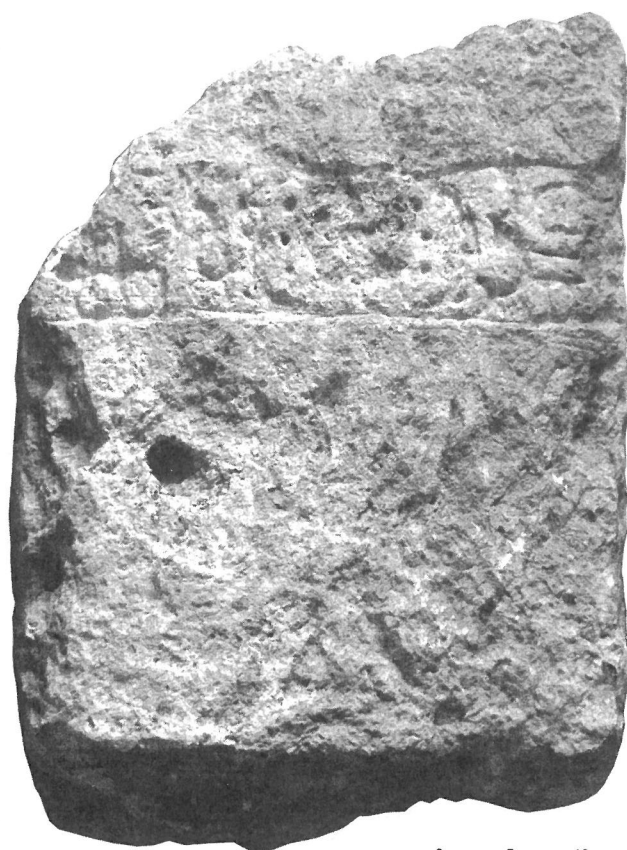


Fig. 4. The carved capstone (photograph by Joseph Ball).

*Leek*, was eventually interred – was named the *Sak Yok Naah*, probably ‘the White Reading House’, as referred to in the text of Capstone 19 (Lacadena García-Gallo 2003: 47, 104).

Returning to the text on the Buenavista capstone we can thus see that the initial collocation undoubtedly recorded the dedicatory verb and that the second glyph block specified that it was the vault that was topped off. This leaves the third and final glyph block (C1). Assuming that the same structure and syntax are recorded in the text as the counterparts from the Northern Lowlands, we would conclude that this recorded a reference to a particular architectural feature. What remains are part of a cartouche and below it is the numeral 9, probably read *baluun* ‘nine’. As this does not record a lexeme of any known architectural feature we surmise that this must have been the Classic period name of Structure 4. This name echoes for instance with that of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque that was named the *Baluun E’t Naah*, or ‘nine deeds house’, as well as the *Baluun Pet Naah*, ‘nine round house’ named in the texts of the Temple of the Sun at Palenque (see Stuart and Houston 1994: 89; Martin 2004: 113).

#### Dating of the Glyphic Text

Although the glyphic text is synoptic and composed of very few glyphs, one exhibits sufficient stylistic elements to be able to isolate it and subject it to a paleographic analysis. Here, by paleography we mean the detailed study of the appearance, graphic form and evolution of individual signs in Classic Maya writing (see Lacadena García-Gallo 1995). Overall the style of the glyphs is clearly of the Classic period, but none of the features in themselves suggest that this

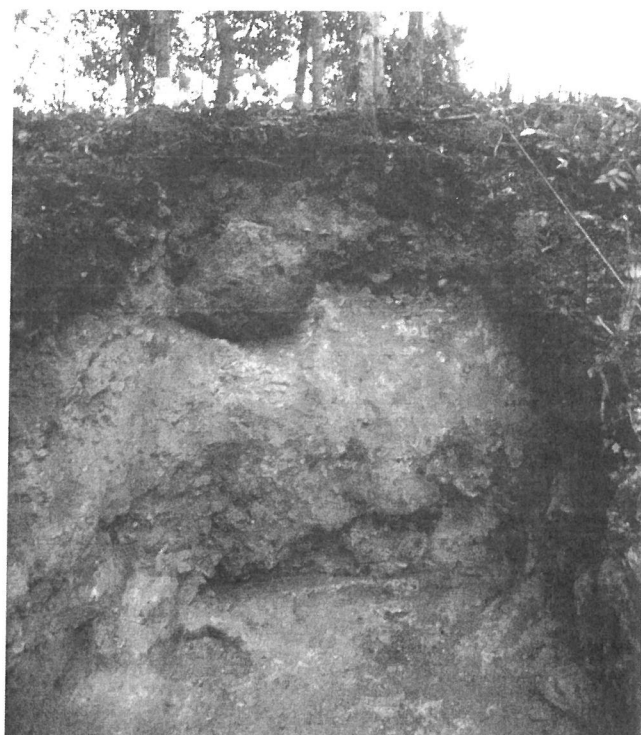


Fig. 5. The carved capstone in situ atop spinewall of Str. 4-1<sup>st</sup> (photograph by Jennifer Taschek).

is either a particularly early or late text. The particular variant, or allograph, of the possessive prefix *u-* (designated as T3 in the Thompson catalogue; see Thompson 1962:445), is here written as a rounded bracket, enclosing two circular elements, separated by a more triangular notch in the middle. In the broadest of strokes this description could very be applied to most variants of the *u* vocalic sign, yet this particular variant is further embellished by a row of three larger dots on the outside of the bracket. This distinguishes this variant from other earlier as well as later forms (see Lacadena García-Gallo 1995: Fig. 2.46 and 2.49). For instance, neither the text of the Hombre de Tikal (dated to AD 406), Stela 31 at Tikal (AD 445), nor Monument 160 at Tonina (AD 514), exhibit a singular example of this variant, preferring instead brackets decorated by cross-hatching (Fig. 8a). Also closer to the Belize Valley, a review of the corpus of Naranjo during the regency of Lady Six Sky (AD 682–741) and the reign of her son *K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk* (r. 693–728+) reveals that it is equally devoid of this particular allograph. Instead a much

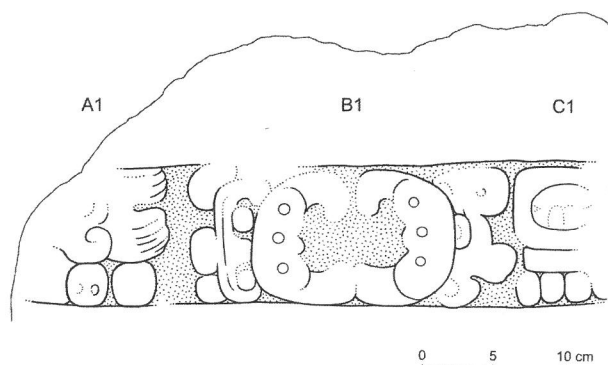


Fig. 6. The glyphic text of the carved capstone (drawing by Christophe Helmke).



more simple and modern bracket sign (cataloged as T1) was preferred at Naranjo from the seventh century onwards (Fig. 8b). A more ample search on the corpus of texts in the Central Lowlands reveals good examples of the T3 allograph at sites such as Yaxchilan, Caracol and Tikal (Table 2) (Fig. 8c–e).

Based on the incidences tabulated above, we can see that this particular allograph (T3) of the vocalic sign *u* was

predominantly in use for a century, sometime between the first half of the sixth until the mid-seventh century (i.e. AD 537–642). Thereafter we observe a hiatus in its usage until the late examples at Tikal, which we suspect are revivals, used as deliberate archaisms (Fig. 8c) (Table 3). Assuming that the Buenavista capstone exhibits the use of contemporary allographs, without deliberate archaisms, we can date its text on paleographic grounds to sometime between the sixth and seventh centuries. As such, the text on the capstone is coeval not with the bulk of the construction of Structure 4, but is rather contemporary with the refurbishment of the superstructure in the mid-seventh century. As such, the text served to dedicate the superstructure of Structure 4-1<sup>st</sup> during the seventh century and was intended to mark the completion of one of the major episodes of architectural refurbishment at the site.

### Final Thoughts

In terms of contemporary relations, it is interesting to remark on the incidence of paleographic traits at courts and sites in the vicinity of Buenavista. The particular allograph of the *u* vocalic sign seen on the carved capstone is absent from the monuments of the long-reigning Naranjo king “Aj Wosal”. This was one of the longest reigning monarchs in recorded Maya history, acceding to the throne AD 546 and ruling until sometime after 615 (Martin and Grube 2000: 71–72). Despite the many monuments that survive from his reign, none employ this particular allograph, an absence that is all the more noteworthy considering the proximity of Naranjo and Buenavista, which are only 13 km apart.

It is therefore remarkable that precisely the same allograph was used on contemporaneous monuments at Caracol, the other dominant center in the region. The majority of monuments that bear this allograph were raised by “K’an II” – the important seventh century ruler of the site (r. AD 618–658) – although monuments of his immediate predecessor “Knot Ajaw” (Stela 6) also include examples (see Martin and Grube 2000:90–93). By the reign of his successor, *K’ahk’ Ujo’l K’inich*, this allograph appears to have fallen into disuse since it is not represented in any of his texts.

Thus, were the text on the Buenavista capstone to speak of external relations, considering the particular signs elected to compose the text, it would seem to speak suggestively of relations with Caracol to the south, rather than to Naranjo, although the latter is at the threshold of the Belize Valley. Such putative influence could coincide with the reign of



Fig. 7. The initial segment of the glyphic text of Capstone 10 at Ek Balam recording the dedication of Room 38 in AD 832 – 10.0.1.15.1 (drawing by Christophe Helmke, after Lacadena García-Gallo 2003: Fig. 13).

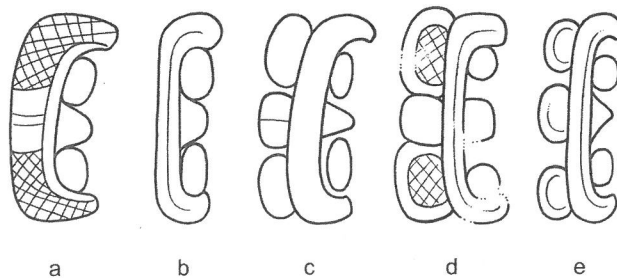


Fig. 8. Examples of allographs of the vocalic sign *u*, in: a) Early Classic texts (Tikal, Stela 31, E19) and b) Late Classic texts (Naranjo, Stela 23, F9). Variants of T3 in texts from c) Yaxchilan (Lintel 35, D7), d) Caracol (Stela 3, A16b) and e) Tikal (Stela 22, A2) (drawings by Christophe Helmke).

K'an II, who waged wars in the realm of Naranjo—attacking the subsidiary centers of *Tzam* and *Koka'* (the bent-Kawak place) in 626 and 627. With troops marching from Caracol to Naranjo in the third decade of the seventh century it is difficult to imagine that these did not affect sites along the way, including Buenavista. It is perhaps precisely as part of such forays that court members and scribes exchanged ideas and fostered bonds, including sign inventories.

In the late seventh century, ongoing renovation of the Central Plaza was abruptly halted, Buenavista's ancient South Ballcourt was deconsecrated, and several buildings were burned or demolished, among these Structure 4 (Ball and Taschek 2017, 2018). The latter's superstructure was partially toppled, the core of the frontal wall filling the north room, the upper façade and vault mass spilling backwards onto the transverse spinewall and into the rear chamber. A few first course vault spring stones were found in place along the north edge of the standing spinewall, and among these was the sculpted capstone bearing the short glyphic text. Precisely how or when the capstone came to be so situated we cannot say, but its positioning could equally well reflect a deliberate act, or the serendipitous result of structural collapse. Despite the best efforts of archaeology and epigraphy, the answer to this seems destined to remain among the secrets that ancient Buenavista is unlikely to yield.

Two subsequent efforts were made to revive and revitalize Buenavista as a seat of power – one early in the eighth century, another in late mid century – but neither appears to have involved rehabilitation of Structure 4, and both were short-lived, neither lasting more than a few years or so at most (Ball and Taschek 2018). Structure and capstone lay as they were following the building's seventh century collapse until their excavation in 1988. The capstone then languished for nearly thirty years unappreciated as to its true significance, but we hope now to restore it once more to its intended role, proclaiming the deeds of kings of old.

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**ABSTRACT:** In 1988, an unusual sculpted vault capstone, bearing a short text of three glyphs, was found atop the spinewall of a collapsed, two-chamber building surmounting a pyramidal platform at the site of Buenavista del Cayo in western Belize. This building, designated Structure 4, closes the south side of the site's Central Plaza. Curated with other materials from that season, the stone was recently relocated in our storage facility, while reorganizing materials for repatriation to the Belize Institute of Archaeology. Contextually and stylistically dated to the seventh century AD, the capstone appears to

refer to a dedication event and may provide the ancient name of the building. This identifies Structure 4 as marking the completion of an ambitious seventh century elaboration of the Central Plaza at Buenavista. Herein we describe the capstone and its context, and discuss its glyphic text in terms of content and of paleography allowing us to explore the possible connections to other courts and realms that this text implies.

**RESUMEN:** En 1988, una inusual tapa de bóveda esculpida con un texto corto de tres glifos, fue encontrada sobre el muro central de un edificio colapsado de dos cámaras que superaba una plataforma piramidal en el sitio de Buenavista del Cayo en el oeste de Belice. Este edificio, denominado Estructura 4, cierra el lado sur de la Plaza Central del sitio. Junto con otros materiales de esa temporada, la piedra fue recientemente reubicada en nuestras instalaciones de almacenamiento, mientras se reorganizaban los materiales para su repatriación al Instituto de Arqueología de Belice. La tapa de bóveda se puede fechar por su contexto y estilísticamente en el siglo VII d.C. El corto texto parece referirse a un evento de dedicación y puede proporcionar el nombre antiguo del edificio. Esto identifica a la Estructura 4 como la culminación de un ambicioso Proyecto constructivo del siglo VII en la Plaza Central de Buenavista. En este artículo describimos la tapa de bóveda y su contexto, y discutimos su texto jeroglífico en términos de contenido y de paleografía, lo que nos permite explorar las posibles conexiones con otros cortes reales y reinos que este texto implica.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG:** Im Jahr 1988 wurde in einem eingestürzten Gebäude mit zwei Räumen auf einer pyramidenförmigen Plattform am Fundort Buenavista del Cayo im Westen von Belize ein ungewöhnlich geformter Gewölbedeckstein mit einem kurzen Text aus drei Glyphen gefunden. Dieses Gebäude mit der Bezeichnung Struktur 4 schließt die Südseite der „Central Plaza“ der Fundstätte ab. Der Deckstein wurde mit anderen Materialien aus dem gleichen Kontext aufbewahrt und vor kurzem bei der Organisation der Artefakte für den Transport an das Belize Institute of Archaeology wiederentdeckt. Kontextuell und stilistisch kann der Schlußstein in das siebte Jahrhundert n. Chr. datiert werden. Die Inschrift scheint sich auf ein Widmungsereignis zu beziehen und gibt möglicherweise den Namen des Gebäudes wieder. Dadurch wird Struktur 4 als Abschluss eines ehrgeizigen Bauprojektes an der Central Plaza in Buenavista im siebten Jahrhundert identifiziert. In dem Beitrag beschreiben wir den Schlusstein und seinen Kontext und diskutieren seinen Hieroglyphentext inhaltlich und paläographisch, um die möglichen Verbindungen zu anderen Königshöfen dieser Regionen identifizieren zu können, die im Text impliziert werden.

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## Endnote

- 1 If this interpretation of *way* is correct, this would also have implications for our understanding of the name of the final “month” of the Haab, or the solar year, which in the Classic Period was known as the *way-haab* or *u-way-haab*. Thus, rather than meaning ‘the year sleeps’ as has been suggested elsewhere (Rice 2009:65) it may refer to the final five days of the year as ‘the vault of the year’, in the sense of the “year’s apex”.

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